DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 355 404 CE 063 258

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TITLE Towards Quality and Equality: Distance Education Developments in the Asia/Pacific Region.
PUB DATE 23 May 92
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Distance Education Association of New Zealand (Dunedin, New Zealand, May 23, 1992).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Adult Education; *Competition; Developing Nations; *Distance Education; Economic Development; Educational Development; Educational Opportunities; Educational Practices; *Educational Quality; *Equal Education; Foreign Countries; Institutional Survival; Postsecondary Education
IDENTIFIERS *Asia Pacific Region; University of the South Pacific (Fiji)

ABSTRACT

One of the most significant distance education developments within the Pacific region in recent years has been the diminishing quality and increasing inequality created by ad hoc competition. Four views of quality are relevant: (1) quality has no existence as an absolute, it is inseparable from context, always relative; (2) indicators for quality measurement can have no inherent or reliable meaning independent of context, including socio-economic, political, and other factors; (3) indicators tend to focus on cause/effect data, to isolate parts of what is ultimately not so much a thing as it is a set of relationships; (4) value-neutral approaches to quality are ultimately invalid. Whether recognized or not, connections exist between the regional and national endeavors of Pacific Island states and New Zealand and Australia as Pacific Rim countries. Competition can be detrimental to both educational health and quality. Clients with few resources do not always have the freedom to choose what they see as good. Through aid-assisted program delivery and multiple scholarship award schemes, Pacific Rim countries are undermining their postsecondary institutions. The University of the South Pacific and other local institutions cannot compete equally against externally funded packages; their long-term viability on is endangered. The region has infinite potential for strengthened and new developments in distance education. Institutions and governments must evaluate distance education's quality, clients, and social and economic consequences. (YLB)

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Towards Quality and Equality
Distance Education Developments in the Asia/Pacific Region

A Teleconference Session funded and organised by
the Commonwealth of Learning
for

The Distance Education Association of New Zealand
Conference on 23 May 1992, at the
University of Otago, Dunedin

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Towards Quality and Equality: Distance Education Developments in the Asia/Pacific Region

Initially, I had intended to talk with you generally about the University of the South Pacific and specifically about the constraints which its context places on particular aspects of distance teaching and learning. I have in recent days decided not to do this, for two reasons.

The first is that yesterday's presentation on 'Pacific and Asian Perspectives' was a plenary, not a parallel paper, session. This means that the Conference as a whole has already had the opportunity to know some of what I might have said, especially from Ruby Va'a and David Meacham's papers on this 'developing world'. The second, related to this, is that this teleconference time and opportunity provided by the Commonwealth of Learning should perhaps rather be used by me to say some things that no other paper probably can, despite the rich variety of perspectives and presentations on the conference agenda.

As time is brief, I trust that delegates will appreciate the necessity for me to focus on a limited number of issues and to comment on these in what might seem a stark, direct way. First, I shall share some views about quality and quality indicators. Second, I shall focus on the issue of interrelatedness: on the connections, recognised or not, between the regional and national endeavours of Pacific Island states and NZ and Australia as Pacific rim countries.

My hope overall in this is to increase our mutual understanding as colleagues in the Pacific; to say that the current peaceful co-existence of our endeavours is desirable and valued but that it is not enough; to suggest that,

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in a variety of ways, the autonomous decisions made by many government ministries and some education providers in New Zealand and Australia are having down - the - line effects on USP and the 40 or so post - secondary institutions in our twelve member countries. I want to talk, in simple terms, about Quality and Equality in the international marketplace, and to suggest that one of the most significant Distance Education developments within the Pacific region in recent years has been the diminishing quality and increasing inequality created by ad hoc competition.

On quality and quality indicators, I should like to share with you four simple views.

The first is that quality has no existence as an absolute; that quality is inseparable from context, always relative.

The second, which follows on, is that indicators for quality measurement can have no inherent or reliable meaning independent of context - and this must include socio-economic, political and other factors.

The third, which follows on again, is that indicators tend to focus on cause/effect data, to isolate parts of what is ultimately not so much a thing. or aggregration of components, as it is a set of relationships between them.

The fourth is a generalisation that value-neutral approaches to quality are ultimately invalid. The agreements we might arrive at finally about what denotes quality, or about the quality of this or that, relate only to value ascribed, in advance, to some perceived norm or ideal. This

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does not invalidate serious attention's being given to matters of quality; it is simply a suggestion that we invalidate our conclusions and efforts if we believe they are occurring in some vacuum of value - neutrality.

I should like to share some practical examples in support of these rather bald statements, using where possible ones which illustrate also the second matter of interrelatedness.

About retention rates in distance enrolment one could say that analysis of attrition/retention is not only useful but also vital to an institution. Such analysis can indicate something important to us about quality in terms of teachers' and learners' goal achievement. It does not, free of context, however, measure quality as an absolute or for comparative purposes.

Two hypothetical cases could be a University of Otago programme with an attrition rate of 9% and a USP programme, delivered to Niue, with an attrition rate of 75%. What the Otago figure might indicate is good subject content, good instructional design and high quality student support. I should not be at all surprised if it did. The USP/Niue figure, however, does not necessarily indicate the absence of any of these. It might reflect perhaps the fact that the New Zealand government had taken a recent decision to cut aid to Niue by over $1,000,000, causing 145 redundancies in the Public Service. In a population of barely 2,000, this foreign aid decision would affect almost every family in Niue and USP retention rates through non-payment of student fees. The figures would thus indicate little about the learners' capacity or about the education provided. They would tell us only something about the

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impact of external aid and economic decisions on small.population bases.

Consideration of assignment turnaround times can throw up similarly disparate cases. A fast turnaround, of perhaps three to four days, might indicate a good managing infrastructure, dedicated teachers, student - centred commitment; it probably frequently does, just as a slow turnaround might reflect their absence. It does not, free of context, however, measure quality as an absolute. By comparison, with this three-day instituion, USP can turn an assignment around, for a Tokelau student, within five weeks (minimum) but often only within nine. This does not necessarily indicate poor institutional performance. It indicates only that the ship between Tokelau and the USP collection point in Western Samoa sails once in every four weeks and not always on the optimum day to connect with on-going air transport to or from the teacher. A three day turnaround and a nine week turnaround in the end tell us little that is certain except that systems external to the respective institutions make the first schedule possible and the second inevitable.

If an indicator of student performance is sought, one might find, hypothetically, that Cook Islands students studying at ATI or Victoria do very well but quite poorly at USP. This might seem to indicate something about internal vis a vis external teaching, or about the quality of the institutions themselves. It more likely might indicate a scholarship scheme under the bilateral aid programme, which advertently creams out of the Pacific the best and brightest of its students, leaving for the regional and local institutions the generally less able students on the cheaper third-country awards. This drawing off process begins in one of our northern hemisphere countries when students are as young as eleven, and continues throughout the region at every

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year of education thereafter, through to postgraduate levels.

USP's current endeavours towards the extension teaching of Science in one of its Melanesian countries from 1993 are proceeding well to date. We know already, however, that the same funding providers who are helping make this possible for us to do are also inadvertently funding some of the best potential students into rim country institutions at Form Six. The quality of distance education in Science which USP will provide will only erroneously be measured by its eventual output.

If Quality is defined in Linke's terms - as the level of goal achievement and the value or worth of that achievement - contextual understanding again is vital. For developing countries' governments, education's goals have to be largely utilitarian; resources expended must produce practical results in terms of numbers, pass-rates and required skills. From the client's perspective, a quality education is one which produces useful graduates in sufficient supply, and at a cost that can be afforded. Ten students travelling from intake to outcome on the back of a truck over a rough road are a better national investment than one or two students having a costly journey in the front seat of a Mercedes.

Such measurements might in some quarters be considered primitive, but this would require some applying of inappropriate cultural judgements. The challenge to 'developing world' educators, perhaps, is to find an honourable interface between excellence and pragmatism.

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When I applied for my position as Director of Extension Services three years ago, I was interviewed on the specific topic of competition within the region. As this was done at a distance and on paper, I still have available the responses that I made. I am now humbled by the naievity of these and their patent dissociation from contextual factors. I contended:

- that competition was no bad thing; that, indeed it usually tended to be good for its players;
- that in the end clients will buy and use the products which seem best able to meet their needs;
- that the pursuit of quality and excellence, and a responsiveness to need are the positive and most effective way of engaging in competition.

Rewriting these now, I would have to contend quite differently

- that competition can be detrimental to both educational health and quality;
- that clients with few resources do not always have the freedom to choose what they see as good or the best product;
- that on a very unlevel playing field (in terms of financial backing), quality, excellence and responsiveness can score few victories.

These views might seem both harsh and debatable to some delegates. I am sorry to report, however, that they no longer lie within the realm of opinion or heartache.

I have been for the past week attending the EDI - World Bank Workshop on Post Secondary Education in the Pacific Region. The Workshop is the culmination of many months of intensive data collection and research throughout the member

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countries. Its purpose last week was to share with Pacific Islands governments and institutions the results of the investigations. These, being still in draft, are embargoed in the short-term.

If there was anything exciting or positive for me in the workshop, it was not the message itself which has long been a local perception - that Pacific rim countries, through aid-assisted programme delivery and multiple scholarship award schemes, are inadvertently but gravely undermining some of our post secondary institutions. What was positive is that the incontrovertible data to prove this now might become available. The message now needs conveying to the donor agencies and the island governments to reconsider and reevaluate their bi-lateral arrangements - not simply to save or revitalise beleaguered institutions, but in the long term interests of human resource development in this region. Within the current pattern, it is now becoming clear that these needs have little chance of being met for Pacific communities.

I shall confine myself to one example which I hope will give some substance to this issue. A Pacific regional agency might currently be shopping for a distance course in Report Writing Skills. The agency's employees reside throughout the USP region. A hypothetical North American institution might tender at CN$94,000 - for a pilot course within two years for 15 students. A hypothetical Australian institution might similarly tender at A$93,000. The USP Institute of Education, in conjunction with Extension Services, then tenders at F$33,000, for a course within eight months for 125 students. In terms of course quality, the local course should be top-rated. The IOE has been working for many years in the field of second language skills and acquisition and the quite specific national characteristics and difficulties

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of Pacific language speakers. The Institute is advisor/consultant for many Ministries of Education on this issue.

Why might the IOE not win this contract on the basis of appropriate content and expertise; on the basis of a well-established delivery and support system within the region, and on the basis of cost-efficiency? The answer is simply that the North American bid would come with external aid funding to pay itself, as would the Australian. To buy the USP course will cost the agency real money, unless a donor can be found who will allow purchase on an open and freely competitive market. Such a donor is not always easy to find.

There are many similar failures for USP in the field of teacher education - the area of expertise out of which the University was born and sustained in its early years. That USP and other local institutions cannot compete equally against externally funded packages is now endangering their long term viability on the playing field.

Student numbers, both at USP and some other institutions in the region, are beginning to fall. This does not necessarily denote falling quality (although inevitably this could happen in a flow-on effect). The roll decreases simply reflect the fact that $50 million dollars of rim country aid to the Pacific is currently flowing back into outside institutions in the form of student scholarships. This $50 million supports 2,600 Pacific Islands students.

Funding is also being provided by these governments for students to study at institutions within the Pacific (and this is much appreciated), but at $23 million, it is clearly less than half, With it, 11,000 students can be

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supported. The cost of one Pacific Islands student studying at Victoria or ATI would easily fund three students at USP or ten at the Solomon Islands College of Higher Education or the National University of Western Samoa.

An additional factor long known to be contributing to the region's human resource development dilemma is that 60% of the students who are educated outside of the Pacific system never return to their communities and thus become a lost investment.

My view that the quality of education in the Pacific international market is declining is based on the fact that the best providers and programmes cannot always survive or be made available to students. That inequality in the marketplace is increasing is now related to this in a cause/effect spiral. No fewer than twenty-nine salespeople have crossed my doorstep alone within the last four weeks, many of them selling or recruiting for programmes which Pacific institutions already offer or are endeavouring to establish.

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There are many things to say by way of conclusion. First, the region has infinite potential for both strengthened and new developments in distance education. It is, for reasons which Ruby Va'a has no doubt shared (and as the Commonwealth Of Learning has identified in its recent review), one of the most difficult and challenging areas of the earth's surface in which to provide or receive distance education. In keeping with its vast spread of 33 million square kilometres, there is room for many and for a variety of providers. Assessment of the quality of what we are doing, however, for whom and, in

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particular, with what social and economic consequences, is an especially serious task in a developing world context. To be effectively undertaken, it is a task which must be addressed by institutions and governments both within and outside the region.

At the end of the day, it must be admitted that little, if anything, of what we do as educators here affects our neighbours and colleagues in developed countries, yet much of what is done and legislated for in Australia and New Zealand has some kind of effect within the Pacific. This is no one's fault, perhaps, but the problem remains in search of some co-operative collective ownership.

There are good ways to go, and I am moved to acknowledge Massey University, which has for many years provided distance education to this region. It has done so on carefully considered terms, which it formally publishes in its annual Calendar. These not only provide for mutual cross-crediting between our universities but also place limits on access by specified categories of student. USP Centres in response assist locally with Massey enrolments and examinations. Such arrangements optimise benefit and minimise its opposite. They and many other good ways to go are there for us to find.

Considering your theme, as I have had to over recent days, I found that a particularly Pacific image kept coming to mind: that of the basket within the basket. Although its common meaning is something else, I should like to leave it with you as the one graphic of my presentation: as an image of quality and its enveloping context, and also of our relatedness as small and large providers.

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On behalf of my USP colleagues, I wish DEANZ an enjoyable a productive continuation of its conference, and thank you for your time and patience.

Vinaka vakalevu.

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